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ABSTRACT

In Northern Ireland, groups of school children, parents, teachers, and principals are supporting religiously integrated schools. This paper gives an account of this movement and the history behind Catholic/Protestant tensions in Northern Ireland. The "Controlled" school system in the country is largely Protestant, whereas the "Maintained" system is mostly Roman Catholic. Although it is possible for a child to cross over from one type of school to another, it is extremely unusual. These separate school systems reflect separate geographical communities and can be traced back to the 17th century. By 1921, Northern Ireland was cleaved from what became the Republic of Ireland, with the former remaining under British control, giving a decided advantage to Protestant schools. Efforts to establish integrated schools were begun by parents in the early 1970s, with the first integrated school being founded in Belfast in 1981. By 1989 the Education Reform Order for Northern Ireland officially guaranteed the right of Integrated Schools to exist through financial maintenance. Funding for the schools has been a challenge, and Protestant and Catholic church officials have either reacted passively to these changes or have actively discouraged integration. The schools themselves feature a philosophy of education and integration in a relaxed atmosphere. (RJM)

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ISLANDS OF HEALING: A ST. PATRICK'S DAY LOOK AT INTEGRATED SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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In keeping with the tortured history of Ireland, the movement of integrated religious education in Northern Ireland has been a mixture of beautiful and discordant rhythms. On the whole a difficult dance of willing partners (Catholic and Protestant) struggling to maintain their steps in the face of jeering or silently cold sideliners.

> We must extend the hand of friendship
> our Reverend Bishop said
> Learn to love your Protestant neighbor
> This is the way ahead.
> Help your fellow citizen
> And live the Christian rule
> But do not send your children
> To an integrated school.
> (Anonymous...a parent in Northern Ireland).

Integrated education, by race and certainly by religion, is a "given" in the United States in the 1990's. Having come through decades of racial segregation issues and a painful transition

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toward racial integration, many Americans have forgotten much of the fear and rage accompanying our own change, imperfect as this change still is.

St. Patrick's Day, an uniquely American-Irish holiday celebration, has served in recent years as an reminder that the segregation-integration issues of Northern Ireland are no less than a mirror of our own partially buried, but unresolved, fear and rage as we think of coming together with those we most fear. In New York City St. Patrick's day thinking has detoured to a focus on the segregation-integration of gay and straight individuals in a parade intended to celebrate Irish contribution to this country; a parade controversy which serves only as symbol of deeper issues.

In Northern Ireland another aspect of the fear and rage beneath segregation-integration issues keeps momentum.

Americans are aware of the segregated lines of dancers long drawn: British/Unionist/Protestant vs. Irish/Nationalist/Catholic. The periodically erupting struggle between these groups reflects a highly complex situation involving history, politics, geography, economy, and culture.

Americans are not aware of a slow dance toward religious integration performed by a relatively small but purposeful and brave group of school children and parents, teachers, and principals...a school dance of beautiful symmetry sometimes interrupted, but not yet destroyed, by the awkwardness of a fear and rage that Americans should recognize, if not understand.

The educational system is not integrated by religion in

Northern Ireland. Most Americans assume that it is. In fact, it is split down the middle: the "Controlled" system is almost entirely Protestant. The "Maintained" system is almost entirely Roman Catholic (most estimate 98% of Catholic primary school children attend Maintained or Catholic schools; 95% of Controlled or Protestant schools have fever than 5% Roman Catholic enrollment). While it is possible for a child to cross over to the other system, it is extremely unusual. Some Roman Catholic parents have elected Controlled schools for their children in an attempt to help them "pass" as Protestants, which might help them to obtain a good job after graduation. A Controlled school on a resume indicates Protestantism. Protestants are more likely to be hired in Northern Ireland, a country largely controlled by Protestants even though preferential treatment of Protestants is officially non-existent. Both school systems are funded through public monies, although the percentage of funding for Controlled or Protestant schools is somewhat higher.

Separate school systems in Northern Ireland reflect separate geographical communities and widely divergent thinking. The "Troubles", of which Americans are well aware, euphemistically describe the most recent twenty-four year segment of violence in Northern Ireland which has gone on since medieval times (over 900 years). As Liz McWhirter, a Northern Irish researcher, indicates: two problems seem central in this conflict: 1) external relations with Great Britain, and 2) internal relations between the two major community groups in Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics,

with religious differences tending to coincide with political allegiances and national identity.

Segregated education in Northern Ireland is not new. The Penal laws of the 1690's were laws imposed on Irish Catholics throughout all of Ireland which was then entirely under British governance. These laws prohibited Catholics from establishing schools, from employing tutors, from sending their children abroad for education, and from teaching in Protestant schools. Catholics, while invited to attend Protestant schools, primarily to learn Protestantism, refused. The famous "Hedgerow Schools", named for the hedges they were often hidden behind, began and lasted until the 1800's despite the fact that they were illegal and that the teachers were threatened with death if caught.

The Penal Laws were repealed in the 1790's and a National Board of Education was put in place for all of Ireland. It was planned as non-denominational, but quickly became denominational under the local priest or minister until the 1920's. By 1921 secondary school existed only for the wealthy and these, too, were segregated.

In 1921 Northern Ireland was divided away from what became the Republic of Ireland; the six counties of the north remaining under British control. A new minister of education was appointed in the North by England and, once again, an attempt was made to integrate. Initially Catholic schools in the North refused to recognize the authority of the new minister and attempted to attain financial support from the Republic of Ireland. This support was

forthcoming, but only for one year. The Catholic church was now in a weakened position in terms of education: they received dwindling financial support, were not represented on education committees in the North, and the ministry had begun to cater to Protestants. At this time, any schools, including Catholic schools, which were handed over to the Ministry, were given 100% financial support and were referred to as "Controlled", but the Controlled schools were seen by Catholics as de facto Protestant schools. Schools which remained independent received grants for heating and cleaning only and were referred to as "Voluntary" schools.

In 1930 the Education Act attempted to make concessions to both Protestants and Catholics: Protestants were granted the right to have only Protestant teachers in the Controlled schools; Catholics were granted further financial support for Voluntary schools (50% grants for capital expenditures; 50% grants for maintenance; financial support which was increased in 1945 and again in 1967).

By 1947 nearly all Protestant schools had been turned over to the Ministry and were now referred to as "State" or "Controlled" schools; by the 1970's nearly all Catholic schools had accepted "Maintained" status (80% grants for capital expenditures; 100% grants for maintenance). Currently, government funded schools in Northern Ireland are divided along these lines and almost totally segregated by religion.

Integrated education in Northern Ireland is not new either. Attempts at religious integration are apparent throughout Irish

history, but generally these attempts focused on incorporating Roman Catholics into a Protestant system. Attempts at equal integration are less evident. Despite the noted appearance of an Integrated school in Belfast as early as 1812, early attempts at integration were isolated and sporadic, begun by either Protestants or Catholics inviting the other to join.

The door was opened by the government for integrated religious education in Northern Ireland by the Dunleath Act of 1978 (proposed by Lord Dunleath, a member of the House of Lords and prominent Northern Irish politician) which enabled existing Controlled (Protestant) schools to become Controlled/integrated or cross-community schools. There was no rush to make use of the new act.

Enter the dancers.

The recent effort to establish Integrated schools, as an attempt to resolve conflict between Protestants and Catholics through the establishment of new schools, was begun by parents in the early 1970's. It is now a combined, and geographically widespread, effort by parents and educators of both religious groups with the aid of the local "Library Board" (somewhat similar to our own Board of Education but responsible for all schools in a given area). These schools bring Protestant and Catholic children, teachers, and administrators together on a daily basis. The concept behind the Integrated schools seems to be that of using children as agents of change, not a new concept but a powerful one. If children experience a different, more positive way of life, they will ultimately accept the new way and, as adults, continue to

advance the practice of integration and peaceful coexistence.

The first of the new Integrated schools, Lagan College ("college" is used here to refer to what Americans would call a high school) in Belfast, was set up in 1981, through parent pressure, as a secondary school. Since that time nine additional Integrated schools have been established in Belfast and throughout the countryside of Northern Ireland (eight primary and one additional secondary school) with additional schools planned and implemented each year.

By 1989 The Education Reform Order for Northern Ireland officially guaranteed the right of Integrated schools to exist through financial maintenance, provided a new Integrated school can attract sufficient pupils, provide a balanced curriculum, and give evidence of balanced religious integration.

The difficulty involved in establishing an Integrated school in Northern Ireland, however, might not be immediately clear. Each Integrated school begins outside of the established system of Controlled and Maintained schools. Each school is established as a new entity. While the government supports the idea of integrated education in theory these schools are not funded until they have proven that they can exist for two years without government financial support and until they have passed a government evaluation. Should this evaluation prove successful, they are funded for 100% of capital expenditures and 85% of maintenance except at the nursery level which is the total responsibility of the local school. This procedure necessitates an almost impossible

fund raising task by interested parents and school staff which fluctuates between bake sales and grant writing for two years of virtual hand-to-mouth existence. Support is offered by three Integrated school support groups, ACT/All Children Together, BELTIE/Belfast Charitable Trust for Integrated Education, and NICIE/Northern Ireland Committee for Integrated Education; three groups which sometimes disagree on integration theory and implementation, and seem to rival each other for power.

Fledgling Integrated schools have the same operating expenses as any other school. They are required to pay the same salaries to teachers and administrators and to offer the same national curriculum. They have the additional problem of finding and financing adequate space. The problem of funding the 15% of maintenance expenses and the total nursery expense remains after government funding finally commences and the Integrated schools have joined the ranks of what has been called the "Maintained" system along with the Catholic schools.

Requirements for Integrated schools involve a numerical balance (60-40% either way) of Protestants and Catholics at all levels: among the children, the teachers, and the individual school governing board. This balance is difficult to achieve not only because of lack of interest: Communities are often separated geographically by religion making transportation an issue and tapping parental fears regarding sending a child into another group's stronghold; working in an integrated school requires a teacher or administrator to leave an established system (and

pension plan) for an experiment full of risk with the expectation of not being welcomed back again if the experiment fails (these professionals see the decision as one of burning bridges behind them; they are often spurned by those remaining inside the established system for abandoning ship).

Neither the officials of the Protestant nor Roman Catholic churches support Integrated schools: Protestant officials seem to have taken an "on the fence" public position in relation to Integrated schools, neither giving nor withdrawing support, allowing the Roman Catholic Church officials to be vocal against Integrated education and, in essence, fight the battle alone. The Roman Catholic officials are more outspoken against Integrated schools although not always in official statements. A congress of Roman Catholic bishops publicly stated their awareness that some parents will wish this form of education for their children and that the church will do nothing to impede it; this has not, however, been reality.

Some official statements have been negative: that Integrated education is pretty well old hat (haven't the schools always been integrated), that Integrated education is incorrectly seen as a panacea for all ills, that the possibility of Integrated education helping to resolve the difficulties in Northern Ireland is remote.

Unofficial statements and procedures are much more negative: one parish priest told parishioners they would go to hell if they sent their children to an Integrated school. First communion has been withheld (or made extremely difficult to qualify for) for

Roman Catholic children in Integrated schools. Roman Catholic children in Integrated schools have been tested to determine readiness for first communion; Roman Catholic children in Roman Catholic schools are not tested. These Integrated school children have been tested under harsh conditions which have lead to unnecessary failure to qualify. They have sometimes been judged as ineligible or inferior, even if they respond to questions correctly, because they cannot experience the "Catholic ethos" outside of a Catholic school. Roman Catholic children who attend Integrated schools have consistently participated in a separate first communion service from Roman Catholic children who attend Roman Catholic schools because of their "inferior experience". Roman Catholic priests have not been permitted to work with Integrated schools; at least one Catholic priest is known to have been transferred after working closely with an Integrated school.

It may be difficult for Americans to understand, despite our own history, why a church group would be against bringing people together, especially children, under the rubric of Integrated education. It may be difficult to remember, or to transfer to a different situation, what it is like to feel your ideas and values, your lifestyle, your life, threatened by the "other" and to feel the fear and rage that is engendered. And there is a very practical issue here: Integrated schools drain money from a common pot and children from a common locale; funding is distributed according to the number of students in any given school.

So a storm brews outside the school fence, a fence which

effectively creates a geographical island. One enters the gate and the storm is left outside, creating a psychological island where the dance can safely continue. Every one of the ten Integrated schools is different from the norm not only in its integrated status, but in atmosphere. One of the Integrated school principals uses the phrase "island of healing" to describe what a school should be like. Purposefully or inadvertently each of the Integrated schools has managed to become an island of healing for children on a day-to-day basis. The atmosphere, to a school, is gentle and relaxed. There is noise and laughter and some order, but not the sense of rigidity and restriction more common to Northern Irish schools. Children are everywhere, busy at a variety of tasks from determining what floats and what doesn't in tubs of water to booting up for horseback riding. There seems to be a sense of camaraderie, respect, and kindness among staff, between staff and parents, and between staff and children as they dance in synchrony which, while often difficult to achieve, is present in the best of schools anywhere.

These schools are different, not only in a philosophy of integration, but in a philosophy of education; they are child-centered and organized along the lines of the British Infant School or the American Open Classroom system.

The reason or reasons why Integrated schools appear different, not only in a philosophy of integration but in a philosophy of education, are difficult to determine. One suggestion is that those who self-select Integrated schools are reacting against not

only religious segregation but against the rigidity and restriction of the traditional Controlled and Maintained systems. They seem particularly interested in healing, not just for a society, but for individuals on a day-to-day basis, whatever the hurts.

So the dance continues.

More dancers gather as new Integrated schools open.

More critics gather to watch the dance. There are many criteria for success and failure which those evaluating Integrated Education in Northern Ireland consider: some immediate, others long-range. It is a small movement yet, a slow one, and a young one. As a movement, it brings into the spotlight once again the best and the worst of human behavior. For American Irish sympathizers it offers a life-enriching, life-preserving alternative to other life-devaluing American-Irish activities. It is a movement, like others, not perfectly conceived or executed; a movement, like others, which triggers bickering from within and attack from without.

It is a dance begun within small islands of healing, human movement toward togetherness continuing, despite the equally human pull toward separation.

All it needs is our love to make it grow,
All it needs is our hopefulness to show,
And tell those who are choked with fear,
The Prince of Peace is here,
All it needs is our love to make it grow.

O let us spread the pollen of peace...

(Sung by the children of All Children's

Integrated Primary School at a First Communion attended by the school and its parents)